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ABSTRACT

Studies show Hispanics to have substantially higher rates of illiteracy than any other major population group in the United States. Illiteracy is one of a number of language problems for this population; other problems include limited oral English proficiency and native language illiteracy. Hispanics drop out of school in higher numbers and leave school earlier than any other population group. Illiteracy seriously hinders Hispanics' ability to become full participating members of society by limiting employment opportunity and access to other societal privileges. Current federal efforts to address the problem are inadequate in size and ineffective in reaching this population segment. Programs that have been effective are generally community-based, but there is inadequate funding for such efforts. To meet the literacy education needs of the United States, present activities must be expanded and must better target limited-English-speaking adults. (Author/MSE)

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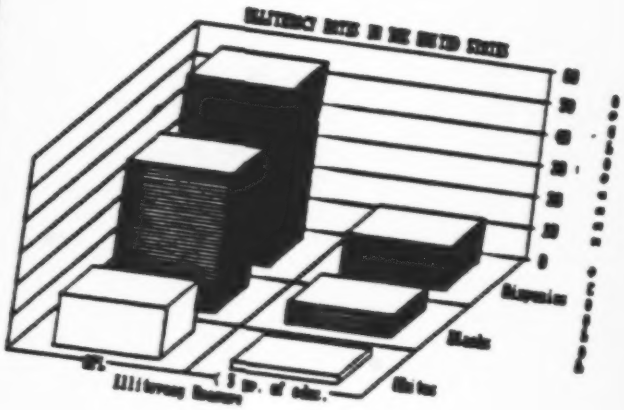
# Literacy in the Hispanic Community



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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA
OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADVOCACY AND LEGISLATION

# Illiteracy in the Hispanic Community

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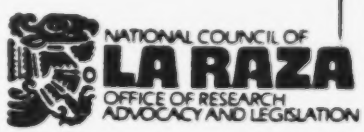

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The existence of a signficant number of illiterate adults seems improbable in a country where the median number of school years completed is 12.6 and the median family income is above $26,000. Yet several studies have shown that illiteracy is a serious problem in the United States, and that Hispanics have substantially higher rates of illiteracy than any other major population group.

Illiteracy is not the only language problem for Hispanics, some Hispanics are also limited-English proficient, so their problem is not only the inability to read and write English, but also the inability to speak English. Literacy and limited-English proficiency are often confused and must be distinguished when assessing literacy in the Hispanic community. Many Hispanics are literate in Spanish, but are limited-English proficient. Other Hispanics may speak no Spanish at all but are still illiterate; this is particularly common among native-born Hispanics. Rates of illiteracy are especially high for Hispanics because of the disproportionately high percentage of Hispanic youth leaving high school without a diploma. Hispanics not only drop out of school in greater numbers than other population groups, but leave school earlier as well, often without obtaining basic reading, writing, and math skills.

Illiteracy seriously hinders the ability of Hispanics to become full participating members of this society. Low levels of literacy among Hispanics limit employment opportunities. Researchers have determined that parents play a critical role in the academic success and future literacy of their children, and illiterate parents cannot help their children in this way. Since Hispanics are a growing segment of the population, their high illiteracy rates have far-reaching effects on the entire society. Hispanics will account for 8-9% of the labor force by 1990, and will constitute 10% of the total population by 2000. Our economy cannot afford to have that large a segment of the labor force illiterate, uneducated or undereducated. Similarly, our democratic system suffers if a large proportion of the citizenry is unable to exercise the franchise effectively due to literacy or language barriers. Thus, illiteracy in the Hispanic community is of grave concern not only to Hispanics, but also to the entire nation. The problem of illiteracy among Hispanics requires special attention by policy makers, educators and the public, as well as the Hispanic community.

Current federal efforts to address the illiteracy problem are inadequate. The Adult Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), and the Library Services and Construction Act reach only a fraction of the total population in need. Even when combined with such private and volunteer efforts as Laubach Literacy, Inc., Literacy Volunteers of America, and other private sector programs, all literacy efforts reach only 4% of the illiterate population.

Current literacy efforts are not only inadequate in size, but are also especially ineffective in reaching Hispanics. JTPA generally serves those who are only marginally illiterate and provides very limited remedial education; those who are limited-English proficient typically are foreclosed from participating. Most literacy programs are not designed to work with individuals who do not speak English, and many tend to serve those who are in search of self-improvement rather than the fundamental elements of reading and writing. The literacy programs that have been effective in serving Hispanics are typically community-based. The important role of community-based organizations in meeting the needs of Hispanics and other minorities has been recognized by the traditional literacy service

providers and various members of Congress, but public funding for such efforts is now almost non-existent.

To effectively meet the literacy needs of the United States, present literacy activities must be expanded. In order to reach Hispanics and other limited-English proficient populations, changes in present literacy programs are also required, including increased targeting of and better resources for serving limited-English proficient adults. Of the many literacy bills that were introduced in the 99th Congress, only one, the English Proficiency Act H.R. 5042, specifically targets the limited-English proficient population and calls for using the most effective vehicles, community-based organizations.

# I. INTRODUCTION

Literacy -- the ability to read and write -- is widely accepted as a fundamental necessity for today's society, and figures on contemporary illiteracy in the United States often provoke shock and disbelief. One recent article in a national weekly called a 13% illiteracy rate in the United States "chilling." Many Americans wonder why a nation that has progressed so far since its founding over 210 years ago has not been able to achieve a fully literate population.

The truth is that illiteracy in the United States is a problem that has always existed. This nation has not become less literate over the years; the needs for a literate society, however, have changed. In earlier times, the completion of such basic tasks as signing your name meant literacy, low levels of schooling were common for all, and reading and writing were often a luxury reserved for the privileged. Low levels of literacy were not severe obstacles to employment when many workers obtained the skills required for their jobs as apprentices, and an education or formal preparation was often unnecessary. Today, however, individuals who can write only their names and cannot decipher written language are hard-pressed to find employment, cast an informed vote, or help their children succeed in school. As the United States has evolved into a highly technological nation, continually greater demands have been placed on the labor force and citizenry. The basic skills that were once adequate to obtain employment and participate in national life do not approach the level of literacy essential today for the economic and political well being of our society.

There has been continuous debate as to exactly what constitutes literacy. There are two traditional measures of illiteracy: (1) the inability to read and write one's native language, and (2) the completion of less than six years of schooling. Under the first traditional measure, illiteracy has been all but eliminated according to self-reported data compiled by the Census; in 1979, only 0.5% of the total population over 14 years of age was illiterate compared to 20% in 1870.[1] A slightly higher rate of illiteracy is derived by using the years of school completed definition; in 1985, 2.7% of the total population over 25 years of age could be considered illiterate by virtue of not having completed more than five years of school.[2] However, just as the ability to sign one's name can no longer constitute literacy, the notion that an individual with a fifth grade education can fully participate in this society is outdated.

Many leaders in education, business and government have recognized the increased literacy demands of today's society. The education director of the AFL-CIO, for example, recently warned that by the 1990s, "anyone who does not have at least a twelfth-grade reading, writing, and calculating level will be absolutely lost."[3] However, such skills most likely will be required in higher-paying jobs; the growing dependence on automation and computers has made basic literacy virtually obsolete in some low-paying jobs. For example, many fast food restaurants now use picture-coded registers that do not require any reading in order to process an order. Such occupations, however, are typically dead-end jobs. The armed forces already require that new recruits perform at a twelfth grade reading level, and literacy training for prospective military personnel lacking basic skills has become a key component of "boot camp." In a technological society that is constantly changing and increasingly complex, an elementary school education is not sufficient preparation to be an informed citizen or to enter the labor force.

An additional problem in using the number of years of school completed to define illiteracy is the faulty assumption that schooling necessarily equals

functional literacy. Unfortunately, several studies have shown that the schools have not been effective in imparting basic skills to all students. In California, 15% of urban high school graduates read at less than a sixth grade reading level.4 The 1983 report from the President's Commission on Excellence in Education estimated that 17% of graduating high school seniors are functionally illiterate.5 A study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress released in 1985 actually tested a representative sample of high school students to assess their reading ability and determined that 55% of White and 80% of Hispanic 17-year-olds probably have difficulty reading academic textbooks.6

Since the traditional measures of illiteracy have not provided an accurate account of the situation, many researchers prefer to examine "functional literacy," or how adept individuals are in using language for practical purposes. The Adult Performance Level Study (APL) at the University of Texas at Austin used such a standard in 1975. APL defined literacy as specified levels of communication, computation, problem-solving and interpersonal relations skills in each of five competence areas: government and law, health and safety, occupational knowledge, consumer economics and community resources. Based on tests given to a representative sample of the United States population, researchers determined that 26 million Americans were functionally illiterate, and an additional 46 million were functioning but not proficiently according to their criteria. This study has been both praised and criticized. Some critics believe that the APL presents an appropriate estimate of the illiterate population, while others claim that the standards of literacy employed are too high.

More recent estimates have placed the size of the illiterate population at 17 to 23 million. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report estimating that 23 million Americans were functionally illiterate, and another 23 million were functioning but not proficiently. In testimony delivered before a Senate literacy task force in December 1985, Secretary of Education William Bennett disputed such data on American adult literacy, arguing that only between 17 to 21 million American adults over 20 years of age are illiterate.

Secretary Bennett's figures were quoted from the English Language Proficiency Survey (ELPS) data as interpreted by Robert Barnes, Acting Director of the Department of Education's Planning and Technical Analysis division and supervisor of the project. The ELPS found that 13% of all adults in the United States could be classified as illiterate. The ELPS employed the Measure of Adult English Proficiency (MAEP) to test a representative sample of 3,400 adults for literacy. The MAEP is designed to determine the ability of limited-English proficient adults to perform practical tasks, particularly the ability to complete applications for government programs. The MAEP consists of 26 questions which test an individual's ability to identify key words and phrases and pick a definition from among four multiple choice responses. According to Barnes, a total of 20 correct answers was chosen to determine literacy, and raising the cutoff score to 21 would have increased the estimate of the illiterate population by three million.7

Other educators and literacy experts have also attempted to develop a more practical definition of literacy. In 1982, then-Secretary of Education Terrel Bell defined literacy as the possession of the essential knowledge and skills to enable an individual to function effectively in his or her environment, as opposed to some general, national standard.8 Carman St. John Hunter and David Harman further developed this concept of literacy in their book, Adult Illiteracy in the United States. They define literacy as:

> "...the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and others' well-being; the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for themselves as being important for their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives."[9]

No figures for illiteracy have been derived using these definitions.

Although the numbers vary according to the measure and definition of literacy employed, there is expert consensus that a substantial problem exists. Although illiteracy rates are falling, the problems caused by illiteracy and our awareness of them are growing. Many leaders in all fields agree that the literacy of the U.S. populace does not meet the needs of contemporary society, and that consequently, current literacy efforts are not adequate. Generally absent from the current discussion, however, is an understanding of the extent of illiteracy among Hispanics. Regardless of the measure used, Hispanics have higher rates of illiteracy than the general population and are underserved by existing literacy programs.

Illiteracy in the Hispanic community is a major problem. Low levels of literacy among Hispanics limit employment opportunities. A report by the National Commission for Employment Policy found that lack of full proficiency in English -- spoken and written -- was perhaps the most important barrier for Hispanics in the labor market. Researchers have determined that parents play a critical role in the academic success and future literacy of their children, and illiterate Hispanic parents cannot help their children in this way. If levels of educational attainment for Hispanics are to rise, Hispanic children and youth must receive a more effective and appropriate education, and the literacy skills of Hispanic parents and future parents must be improved.

This paper reviews past and present efforts by the public and private sectors to reduce illiteracy in the United States and their effectiveness in reaching the Hispanic population. It discusses the extent and implications of Hispanic illiteracy, distinguishing English proficiency from literacy. Finally, it reviews some successful literacy efforts for Hispanics and makes recommendations for increasing English literacy in Hispanic communities.

## II. LITERACY AND ILLITERACY IN THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY

### A. Distinguishing Literacy and English Proficiency

Most measures of literacy that have been employed are not adequate to describe the situation in the Hispanic community, where literacy is often confused with proficiency in English. No popular definition of literacy includes literacy in a non-English language, and, although some have considered the possibility, no national literacy survey has actually determined the rate of literacy in a non-English language. In discussing "literacy" in the Hispanic community, it is necessary to distinguish English proficiency from literacy. Many Hispanics read,

write and speak Spanish, but either have no -- or limited -- proficiency in English. These individuals are literate in Spanish but have not acquired English; they are limited-English proficient. Other Hispanics speak only Spanish but do not read or write either Spanish or English. Many Hispanics who lack English literacy skills are in fact native or fluent English-speakers; their situation is similar to that of many illiterate people in the general population. Full English proficiency is unarguably a fundamental necessity for all U.S. citizens and residents; nonetheless, much of the Hispanic community uses two languages. It is typically easier to gain literacy in a second language than to learn a new language and also learn to read and write for the first time. Both needs exist in the Hispanic community, as well as a need for literacy skills among persons fluent in English.

B. Limited-English Proficiency

As of the 1980 Census, 15.4 million people in the United States lived in homes in which Spanish was spoken. One-fourth of the Spanish speakers surveyed by the Census reported that that they did not speak English well or at all. A 1984 survey of Hispanics over 16 years of age in 30 major media markets indicated that 23% of the sample spoke enough English "to get by," and 20% spoke only Spanish.10 The Children's English Services Study (CESS) estimated that in 1978 there were 1.7 million limited-English proficient children from Spanish-language backgrounds and projected the number would increase to 2.6 million by 2000.11

The lack of appropriate services for limited-English proficient children contributes to English illiteracy among Hispanics. The schools have traditionally been responsible for developing literacy skills among children, yet national data suggest that two-thirds of all limited-English proficient children do not receive any kind of special language services.12 In California less than half ofthe 355,650 Hispanic children identified as limited-English proficient are served by bilingual programs and taught by fully certificated teachers.13 In New York City, 45,000 limited-English proficient children receive no special language services at all.14 Often these children are submersed in English-only classrooms where they fall behind in subject matter at an early age because they do not understand the language of instruction, and they frequently receive inadequate English-language instruction as well. By the time they reach high school, about one-quarter of Hispanic children are two years or more behind their age group, and though most have become fluent in English, such youth are especially likely to drop out of school.

Other limited English proficient children in bilingual programs are exited from such programs as soon as they have acquired basic conversational skills in English. Conversational skills in a second language are learned earlier than the ability to use the language for academic learning, which entails full literacy (reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension).15 Placing a limited-English proficient student, who has only rudimentary oral-English skills and no facility in written language, in an instructional program designed for native English speakers places that student at a disadvantage, increasing the student's likelihood of falling below grade level, and thus retarding literacy. This has become a common practice given pressure to have children enter English-only classrooms "as quickly as possible" without adequate consideration of educational needs.

C. Illiteracy Rates Among Hispanics

Depending on the standard used, the Hispanic illiteracy rate is between 13.5% and 56%. Regardless of the measure employed, Hispanics have substantially higher rates of illiteracy than the White or Black populations.

By the traditional measure of literacy -- the completion of less than six years of schooling -- 13.5% of Hispanics over 25 years of age could be considered illiterate compared to 2.0% of the total non-Hispanic population in the same age group.16 When years of school completed are used, Hispanics are much more likely than Whites or Blacks to be classified as illiterate because the school retention and completion rates are so much lower for Hispanics.17 Only 47.9% of Hispanics 25 years of age and over have completed four years of high school, compared to 75.5% of the non-Hispanic population.

Based on other measures, Hispanics have much higher rates of functional illiteracy. The 1975 Adult Performance Level Study (APL) developed a standard for functional literacy which divided adult functional competency into three levels, APL 1, 2 and 3. APL 1 equaled functional illiteracy, APL 2 equaled marginal literacy, and APL 3 meant advanced literacy. According to these standards, 56% of Hispanics were at APL 1, compared to 44% of BLacks and 16% of Whites. At APL 2 were 26% of Hispanics, 39% of Blacks and 34% of Whites. Only 18% of Hispanic adults were at the most advanced level, APL 3, and could be considered highly literate, compared to 17% of Blacks and 50% of Whites.18

The English Language Proficiency Survey (ELPS) determined that while 13% of the population 20 years of age and older was illiterate, 48% of adults whose native language was other than English were illiterate. In total, the ELPS estimated that 17 to 21 million adults in the United States were illiterate. This study further determined that fully 22% of the illiterate adults in the United States were Hispanic, even though Hispanics totaled less than 6.4% of the adult U.S. population at that time.(See Figure 3.) Thus between 3.7 and 4.6 million Hispanic adults were illiterate out of about 9.6 million Hispanic adults. Therefore, according to the ELPS, between 39% and 49% of the adult Hispanic population was illiterate. Researchers analyzing ELPS data, however, admit that the figures used in the study were conservative and that the actual number of illiterate Hispanics is probably higher.19

Hispanics are in a unique situation when the definitions offered by Bell, St. John Hunter and Harman -- which consider literacy to imply the possession of skills to function effectively in one's environment -- are employed. For all U.S. Hispanics, English proficiency and literacy are extremely important because they are critical for full participation in American life. However, the environments and "self-determined objectives" of some Hispanics also require literacy in Spanish. This is true for individuals who use Spanish as a language of commerce, because they live along the United States-Mexico border, are involved in international commerce, or do business in a community with a large Spanish-speaking population. It is true for families with older non-English speaking relatives or family members residing outside the United States. It is especially true for Puerto Ricans who -- U.S. citizens by birth -- often migrate back and forth between Puerto Rico and the continental United States. Although the precise extent of Spanish literacy among adult Hispanics is not known, the ELPS determined that, according to self-reported data, 86% of adults from non-English backgrounds who were illiterate in English were illiterate in their native language as well.

Rates of illiteracy are especially high for Hispanics because of the disproportionately high percentage of Hispanic youth leaving high school without a diploma. Hispanics leave school at earlier ages, completing fewer years of school, than other population groups. For example, 1985 data reveal that the median number of years of schooling completed by Hispanics is 11.5, compared to 12.3 for Blacks and 12.7 for Whites.20 The dropout rate for Hispanics is the highest for any major United States subpopulation, estimated at 45-50%, and is over 70% in some large urban areas. While dropouts include both limited-English proficient and fluent-English speakers, both groups are often lacking in full English literacy.

D. Effects of Illiteracy

The disproportionately high illiteracy rates among Hispanics not only adversely affect the ability of Hispanics to become full and contributing members of society, but negatively affect the whole society as well.

1. The Effects of Illiteracy on Hispanics

Illiteracy presents difficulties for Hispanics. Common everyday practices, such as following the label directions on a can of food or using public transportation to go to a new destination, can become major challenges. Illiteracy can hinder the ability of Hispanics to enjoy full lives, limit employment opportunities, and affect the future literacy of their children.

Low levels of literacy and education seriously diminish employment opportunities for Hispanics. A report by the National Commission on Employment Policy found that full proficiency in English was perhaps the most important barrier for Hispanics in the labor market.21 However, even when Hispanics speak English, limited literacy skills continue to present barriers to employment. Approximately half of Hispanic students do not graduate from high school; most of these have dropped out after falling one or more years behind grade level. Consequently, many Hispanics leave school without attaining the basic skills necessary to obtain and secure meaningful employment. In 1984, 18.4% of Hispanics with one to three years of high school were unemployed compared to 3.5% of Hispanics who had four years of college or more.22 Many Hispanics with low basic skills are destined for low-level jobs with little hope of improvement and promotion. For some, the only viable alternative is joining the armed forces, and many are required to take remedial courses because of low scores on entrance exams. For the unemployed, substance abuse, crime and prison too often follow.

Limited-English proficiency and low levels of illiteracy also restrict the ability of Hispanic parents to play an effective role in the education of their children. Illiterate parents are not only unable to perform such basic tasks as reading the notices their children bring home from school, but they also lack the opportunity to favorably influence and contribute to their children's education. Even with effective schools, parental involvement is necessary, and functionally illiterate parents forfeit opportunities to become partners in their children's education. Where schools are ineffective, these parents are unable to provide supplementary educational experiences.

Research has shown that parent involvement can increase educational attainment.23 This involvement includes reading to children at home. The report of the U.S. Department of Education's Commission on Reading, Becoming a Nation of Readers, is one of the several studies that have concluded that reading aloud to preschoolers is the single most important activity to encourage success in

reading.[24] Children from low socio-economic backgrounds gain special benefit from being read to,[25] and once children are in school, parents continue to influence how much and how well their children read.[26] Thus parents' illiteracy can negatively affect the future literacy of their children.

Parents who are illiterate and limited-English proficient are doubly hard-pressed to help their children. Not only are they unable to read to their children in English or Spanish, they are uanble to read and interpret written school notices even when they are translated into Spanish. The limited availability of bilingual teachers, administrators and school office personnel also means that these parents are also generally unable to communicate effectively with school administrators and and teachers, and may also be unable to analyze the problems of their children's schools. Because many local school districts do not reach out to Hispanic parents, the educational future of Hispanic children is often left to the schools.[27] Even when illiterate parents are able to predict future failure in their children, they often cannot be effective advocates for them.

Finally, many Hispanics contribute to this society as taxpayers and laborers without having the full benefits of citizenship. Many resident aliens are unable to become naturalized citizens because of limited-English proficiency. Naturalization laws require that prospective citizens demonstrate basic English literacy skills, but because of the lack of English literacy services, Hispanics and others who are limited-English proficient are often foreclosed from seeking citizenship and participating in the political process. Native-born Hispanics who are illiterate are similarly foreclosed from full participation in the political process, and this has hindered equitable Hispanic representation as elected and appointed officials.

2. <u>The Effects of Hispanic Illiteracy on Society</u>

The implications of Hispanic illiteracy are not limited to the Hispanic community, but have far-reaching effects on the entire society. Hispanics represent a growing and increasingly important segment of the United States citizenry and work force. In 1985, Hispanics comprised 7.2% of the total population; this figure is expected to rise to 10% by the year 2000. At present, Hispanics comprise 6.7% of the labor force; estimates show that by 1990 they will account for 8-9% of the labor force. Illiteracy among such a large portion of the citizenry and labor force inevitably affects the entire nation.

High illiteracy rates among Hispanics have serious implications for the economic well-being of the nation. Employers in communities with large Hispanic populations may find themselves hard-pressed to find adequately prepared workers. As Hispanics comprise an increasingly larger proportion of the labor force, the number of retired White workers is also increasing. In its present configuration, the Social Security system will grow more dependent on the wages of minorities to support a White retired class. In 1950, there were 17 workers to pay the benefits for each retiree. By 1992, there will be only three workers to provide the funds for each retiree, and one of these workers will be Black, Hispanic or Asian.[28] In a technological society, the need for the nation's work force to be continuously replenished by adequately trained and functionally literate workers becomes increasingly important. As the number of Hispanics in the labor force grows, their literacy and education levels will inevitably affect the quality of the labor pool and its ability to meet national needs and to support the Social Security System.

Illiteracy also threatens the American political system, because a democratic system depends on the participation of its people. It is inconsistent with our

traditions to foreclose citizens from active participation in the political process, yet illiterate citizens have difficulty casting an informed vote. Because of the increasingly complex political and social issues facing the American people, the ability of citizens to comprehend and analyze candidates' arguments, political parties' platforms, and election propositions and referenda is of significance to the entire society.

### E. Need for Further Research

Addressing the problem of illiteracy in the Hispanic community requires further analysis, and the outcomes of pending literacy studies will have significant implications for Hispanics. The National Assessment of Educational Progress has completed field work on its Adult Literacy Project, which surveyed the literacy skills of a representative sample of the nation's 20 million young adults to use printed information for everyday tasks. The findings, due in late 1986, will have important implications for the development and evaluation of education and training programs for young adults. In addition, a major study of literacy in the Hispanic community by the Tomas Rivera Center in Claremont, California, will include a secondary analysis of three national data sets in order to profile the literacy characteristics of the various Hispanic subgroups and make inventories of current research, policies, and effective instructional/programmatic practices for Hispanics. This study should be completed by 1988.

The high illiteracy rate among Hispanics limits life opportunities for Hispanics and poses several serious problems for the nation. It requires immediate attention. Although more research specifically focusing on Hispanics is needed and would be helpful, enough is known about the dimensions of the problem to begin to deal with it effectively.

## III. PROGRAMS TO COMBAT ILLITERACY

### A. Overview

Public and private efforts to combat illiteracy in this nation have fallen far short of adequately addressing the problem. Virtually all federal education assistance programs have provided only indirect aid for literacy services, such as literacy components incorporated into job training programs.29 Most federal efforts tend to serve those who are in least need; these programs are designed to help individuals who are marginally illiterate or seeking job improvement, and almost all assume English fluency. Few efforts have been tightly targeted to reach those with the fewest skills and least likelihood of receiving other assistance. State and local literacy efforts differ widely, but they too have trouble meeting the need. Literacy efforts by the private sector have similarly been unable to reach Hispanics, particularly those who are limited-English proficient. As a result, Hispanics have traditionally been underserved by literacy efforts.

### B. Past Literacy Efforts

Limited volunteer literacy efforts have historically been conducted in the United States primarily through churches, settlement houses and community self-help

groups, including Hispanic "mutualista" organizations in the Southwest. These efforts were typically limited in duration and number of people served. Volunteer literacy efforts were also an important part of the Civil Rights movements -- especially in the South. Literacy volunteers, primarily trained and supported by Black churches, civil rights organizations and traditionally Black colleges, conducted literacy training designed to help Blacks pass literacy tests required to vote. These efforts followed a Freirean model of teaching individuals to read what they specifically needed in order to improve their lives.

Federal legislation to provide literacy training for the general public was first passed in the 1960s. Efforts came in the form of the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) of 1962 and the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964. The EOA included several programs to combat illiteracy, including literacy classes within Job Corps training centers. Federal funds were also allotted to the states for literacy education for the first time in the form of the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program in 1966.30

Many MDTA and EOA job training programs were replaced by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in 1972. CETA transferred administrative responsibilities for employment training programs to state and local authorities, and was designed to provide training to the chronically unemployed for jobs in the private sector. Basic educational skills and remedial training were common activities under this program. CETA was replaced by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) in 1982. Current publicly-funded programs are described below.

## C. Publicly-Funded Literacy Programs

Although publicly-funded literacy programs are found at the federal, state and local levels, the federal programs provide the greatest level of financial support. The federal government currently supports literacy programs through a wide range of programs including basic education, job training, and library activities. As the attention on illiteracy has grown, some states and local agencies have also directed more of their own resources to literacy services.

### 1. Federal Programs

The federal government's response to the problem of illiteracy is primarily composed of the Adult Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, the Library Services and Construction Act, the Federal Literacy Initiative, and smaller programs including the Family English Literacy Program and Bilingual Vocational Training. The largest single source of federal education funds available for meeting the problems of adult illiteracy is the Adult Education Act (AEA), PL 91-230, as amended by the Adult Education Amendments of 1984, PL 98-511. This program, established in 1966 as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, assists states in providing services to educationally disadvantaged adults. The Act was designed to encourage the establishment of adult public education programs to enable all adults to acquire basic literacy skills and continue their education to at least completion of secondary school.

The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) is the nation's primary public vehicle for employment and training efforts. JTPA is supervised by county and municipal officials and it is overseen primarily by private-sector representatives serving on private industry councils (PICs) appointed by local elected officials. JTPA is a performance-driven system whose principal objective is the training of individuals

for private-sector employment. Basic educational skills and remedial instruction for older youth and adults are also authorized under JTPA, but these activities are not required. Low-income persons and the long-term unemployed are the target groups to be served under JTPA, and specifications require local service delivery areas (SDAs) to spend 40% of funds on youth services.

The Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) also lends support to literacy activities. Under Title I of the legislation -- the Library Services Program -- 200,000 individuals were reached through library-based literacy projects in FY 1981. In recognition of the growing role of libraries in literacy activities, Congress authorized a new program under Title IV as part of the LSCA Amendments of 1984 (PL 98-480). The Title IV Library Literacy Program allows for direct discretionary grants to state and local public libraries for literacy projects. At the state level, funds may be used for coordinating and planning library literacy programs and arranging for the training of librarians and volunteers to carry out these programs. Grants to local libraries may be used for promoting volunteer efforts, providing literacy programs and acquiring appropriate instructional materials.

Two small programs, the Family English Literacy Program and Bilingual Vocational Training, also provide some English literacy services. These programs are extremely limited in size and targeted to those whose primary language is other than English.

In 1983 President Reagan and then-Secretary of Education Terrel Bell announced the Administration's "Literacy Initiative." This campaign involved no new program funding, but was created to focus national attention on the problem of illiteracy, coordinate federal efforts in this area, provide technical assistance to volunteer literacy organizations, and promote public-private partnerships at the state and local levels. According to the Department of Education, the initiative has developed a national clearinghouse on literacy efforts via a computer-based communication network, recruited some 1,700 federal employees to volunteer in local literacy programs, and encouraged use of work-study funds to assign college students to local literacy programs. Currently, the Literacy Initiative functions as a clearinghouse on literacy literature and activities and produces a newsletter.

2. State Literacy Programs

State Education Agencies administer funds they receive from the federal government through the Adult Education Act, but this is often the extent of the state and local response to the problem of illiteracy. In 1981, the amount of non-federal expenditures on literacy efforts throughout the country was $105 million.31 According to the Department of Education, the level of state and local resources allocated to literacy has since risen. The Department also reports that 20 states have developed coordinated literacy campaigns that involve all levels of state and local government, from the Governor to the local library; 24 states are planning increased literacy activities, and 14 states have increased appropriations for adult education. Literacy efforts at the state level vary; for example, two of the states that have significant literacy activities, Virginia and California, have responded to the challenge with two very different programs. Virginia has concentrated its literacy initiative on a very specific group of illiterate persons, while California has employed some of its federal funds to launch a state-wide literacy campaign.

In 1986, Governor Gerald Baliles of Virginia initiated a new policy that would make literacy a condition for parole from state prisons. This policy was met with

both praise and criticism. In testimony before a joint hearing of the U.S. Senate and House subcommittees on education, Governor Baliles defended his initiative as a positive response to a growing problem in Virginia.[32] According to the Governor, 85% of juveniles in Virginia who are brought before the courts are illiterate, and one out of three adult inmates reads at less than a sixth grade level. Recidivism, according to the Governor, is highest among illiterate inmates. The new policy -- popularly known as "no read, no release" -- requires that inmates achieve an eighth grade reading level before they can be paroled. Such literacy is not the only criterion for release; the Parole Board also takes into account the inmate's progress in reading, and those with learning disabilities are not subject to this policy. The State of Virginia has allocated $1 million for this new program.

In California, funds from the Library Services and Construction Act were used to initiate the California Literacy Campaign. This is a library-focused initiative that employs that Laubach Literacy method, training tutors to work one-on-one with illiterates. Each library determines the approach best suited for its area, but each is encouraged to work with local organizations so that the effort becomes firmly based in the community. When federal support for the program ended, the State of California continued funding for the program and expanded the number of library literacy centers. In 1984, the California Literacy Campaign reached 5,000 adults at 400 sites around the state, but this is only a small proportion of the estimated 4.5 million illiterate adults in California.[33]

3. Local Literacy Efforts

Local literacy efforts typically use state and federal funds and are operated by local libraries and local educational agencies. The Department of Education also reports that numerous cities operate literacy programs or are planning such activities.[34] In general, municipal programs are miniscule and reach very few individuals. The City of Boston allocates $1 million a year for literacy programs, but that is only an average of $5 for every illiterate person in that city.[35] In Los Angeles where there are an estimated 465,000 native-born English speakers and an undetermined number of limited-English proficient adults who are functionally illiterate, the city's Library Adult Reading Project reaches only 700 students a year. According to Barbara Clark, Principal Librarian for the Los Angeles Public Library, there are waiting lists at every center, primarily because there are not enough volunteer tutors. She noted that these needs are greatest in low-income Black and Hispanic areas of the city. According to Clark, the project is successful because the libraries are in the communities and people have developed a trust in this institution.[36]

D. Private-Sector Literacy Efforts

Publicly-funded efforts have not been the only literacy programs and activities. Volunteer groups and the business community have also made contributions. Literacy Volunteers of America and Laubach Literacy, Inc., perhaps the two largest volunteer organizations, have for over 20 years focused on the mobilization of volunteers, the development of professionally approved training materials, and the refinement of program support systems to increase adult literacy. These volunteer groups reach illiterate people one at a time, with a trained volunteer working with one non-reader individually. Together, these groups reach an estimated 70,000 people each year.[37]

Corporations have also taken an interest in literacy, realizing that many of their present and potential employees do not possess basic literacy skills. Some companies have developed in-house literacy programs designed to improve worker efficiency and productivity. Other corporate efforts have expanded into communities by providing grants and encouraging their employees to volunteer as tutors. Programs that have benefited from corporate assistance include community-based literacy programs and Laubach Literacy Action, Literacy Volunteers of America, and the Association for Community-Based Education. Some corporations have a special interest in literacy because of the nature of their business. For example, B. Dalton Booksellers, the nation's largest bookstore chain, has taken on literacy as one of its priorities. This company has a full-time staff member whose job is to improve and expand B. Dalton's role in literacy efforts. In 1984 the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL) was established to increase corporate involvement in adult literacy efforts. The BCEL supports a small professional staff which interacts with literacy groups around the country, assessing their activities, needs, and concerns in order to provide informed advice to the business community on opportunities for their involvement and funding. This foundation has been lauded by President Reagan as a model for private-sector involvement in an issue of national concern.

In December 1985, two television networks — the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) -- announced a joint project to mobilize communities across the nation for literacy. Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS) is divided into two phases: an outreach phase, which continued until September 1986; and a public awareness phase, which began in September 1986. The outreach phase was designed to create new -- or support existing — community task forces for literacy in every "market" with ABC and PBS affiliates. The public awareness phase consists of television programming by PBS and ABC. Both stations will highlight the problem of illiteracy in magazine programs, news shows, dramas and public service announcements. PLUS will also enlist the help of some 56 national organizations including Laubach Literacy Action, Literacy Volunteers of America, United Way and the National Conference of Mayors to encourage local support for the PLUS literacy task forces' efforts.

## E. Need For Additional Programs

Only a very small proportion of the illiterate population receives any literacy services. Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America estimate that they are able to reach only 1% of the total population in need.[38] State and local program directors agree that their efforts do not fully address the problem. Jonathon Kozol, literacy expert and author, estimates in his book Illiterate America that all literacy efforts combined reach only 4% of the illiterate population.[39] During 1985 and 1986, the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts and Humanities and the House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education held a series of joint hearings on illiteracy in an attempt to formulate a federal response to the problem. During these hearings, members of Congress repeatedly heard testimony which called current federal activities, including the Reagan initiative, inadequate to meet the need.

The recommendations to Congress by national volunteer groups, members of the business community and literacy activists have emphasized three major themes: volunteers, private-sector involvement, and increased federal support for literacy programs. Donald McCune of the California Department of Education Office of Adult,

Alternative and Continuing Education reported that all state and local resources are not sufficient to meet the needs in that state and called for an increase in the appropriation for the Adult Education Act. Others requested that Congress increase appropriations for the Library Services and Construction Act and support any new initiatives that would increase funding for literacy activities. Peter Waite, President of Laubach Literacy, and Jonathon Kozol emphasized the need for volunteers and the resources needed to recruit and train them. Most agree that literacy activities must be based in the community in order to reach those who go unserved.

F. Proposed New Federal Initiatives

The illiteracy problem has caught the attention of Congress. A formidable obstacle to any new federal initiative, however, is the current federal budget deficit situation. Both Congress and the Administration are reluctant to increase federal expenditures, and the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings legislation -- which requires federal budget cuts -- has placed current federal funds for literacy programs in peril. Even after the Supreme Court overturned the automatic budget cuts authorized by Gramm-Rudman-Hollings, there is still strong incentive for Congress to curtail spending and avoid new expenditures. Nonetheless, various measures have been introduced into the 99th Congress to improve current federal literacy programs or create new ones, including:

- S. 1190 to require states to assure that state prisoners have training in marketable skills and basic literacy before they are paroled;
- S. 1823, the "Technology Litracy Act," to provide grants to local and state educational agencies to strengthen technological literacy through demonstration programs;
- H.J. Res. 429 to designate a "National Literacy Day" to call attention to the literacy problem, improve public understanding of its severity and effects on society, and "reach those who are unaware of the free service and help available for illiteracy";
- H.R. 901 to provide grants to local education agencies to improve the basic skills of economically disadvantaged secondary school students;
- H.R. 3475. the "Adult and Continuing Education Act of 1985," to expand and improve adult and continuing education and determine criteria for defining adult literacy;
- H.R. 4463, the "Effective Schools and Even Start Act," to combine adult basic education for parents and school readiness training for children into a single education program for families who reside within school areas eligible for programs funded under Chapter I of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981. In March 1986, Congressman William Goodling (R-PA), one of the original sponsors of the "Even Start Act," proposed that funding come from the Chapter Two Education Block Grant Program and Adult Education Act and merged his bill with the "Effective Schools" bill sponsored by Congressman Augustus Hawkins (D-CA);

- H.R. 5042, the "English Proficiency Act," to provide grants to community-based organizations, local and state education agencies, tribally-controlled schools, libraries and prisons to provide English literacy training for limited-English proficient adults and out-of-school youth; and

- H.R. 5607, the "National Fund for Literacy Development Act," to establish a national fund to develop private resources for literacy education programs; authorize a national program to coordinate and expand the capacity of national, state and local literacy programs to provide improved services; and establish a National Board for Literacy Development to advise the Secretary of Education on literacy education.

Of these proposed programs, only the "Effective Schools and Even Start Act" has cleared Committee and was approved by the House in June, 1986; no companion bill was introduced in the Senate. The "English Proficiency Act," developed by a coalition of national organizations coordinated by the National Council of La Raza, in cooperation with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, is of special interest to Hispanics because it is designed to provide literacy services to limited-English proficient persons.

## IV. THE UNMET NEED: LITERACY PROGRAMS FOR HISPANICS

### A. Existing Programs That Serve Hispanics

Few of the federal programs designed to promote literacy are able to reach Hispanics. Hispanics receive some benefits from such general programs as the Adult Education Act (AEA), Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), and the Library Services and Construction Act, but their participation has traditionally been limited. Although no literacy programs exist that are specifically targeted at Hispanics, Hispanics are the largest group of participants in programs designed to serve limited-English proficient individuals.

The Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, was developed to increase the capacity of local education agencies to assist children of limited-English proficiency in improving their ability to read, write, speak and understand English, and to provide these children with the opportunity to progress effectively through the school system. In addition to local capacity-building, Title VII also addresses needs which are national in scope and beyond the abilities of local school districts, including research, teacher training and retraining, comprehensive technical assistance, information dissemination and training of teacher trainers.

Although Title VII primarily assists local school districts in working with limited-English proficient children, a new program added to the Act in 1984 provides literacy training for limited-English proficient parents. The Family English Literacy Program is designed to help limited-English proficient parents and other family members learn English and provide them with the skills to help their children succeed in school. In FY 1985, its first program year, only four Family English Literacy Programs were funded nation-wide.

The Bilingual Vocational Training program provides funds to state education agencies, local education agencies, institutions of higher education, private nonprofit vocational training institutions and other nonprofit institutions for

bilingual vocational education programs designed to provide limited-English proficient adults with training in recognized occupations and new and emerging occupations. Such programs include instruction in the English language. These programs benefit limited-English proficient out-of-school youth and adults who would otherwise be foreclosed from meaningful participation in vocational education programs. The program also benefits institutions implementing vocational education programs for limited-English proficient individuals by providing program support and training for bilingual vocational instructors. According to detailed data from the Department of Education, 1986-1987 programs will serve 1,736 individuals in 19 projects.40

B. Why Current Programs Cannot Meet the Need

A large gap exists between the need for literacy services and the capacity of available sevices. Such federal programs as JTPA and AEA typically underserve Hispanics. Most literacy programs are not able to serve people who are not fluent English speakers, and the few programs that serve limited-English proficient adults are far too limited in size to adequately address the need.

AEA, the largest federal literacy program, does not meet the literacy needs of Hispanics. Census data indicate that four million of the 39 million adults over 25 years of age who have not completed high school are Hispanic. Because of limited funding and application, AEA has been able to reach only a small portion of the eligible population. In FY 1981, $100 million was appropriated for AEA and 2.2 million adults were served, of whom 22.4% were Hispanic. Approximately 80% of the 496,000 Hispanics in AEA were enrolled in Level I courses which consist of basic skills and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) training.41 Level I courses do not lead to a General Educational Development (GED) certificate -- comparable to the high school diploma -- for which the Act was designed. Funding levels for AEA have hovered around $100 million since FY 1981. AEA thus provides primarily ESL and basic skills training to only a small proportion of the Hispanic population in need of services, and underserves Hispanics seeking to complete a secondary school education.

Its performance-driven nature and minimal funding levels are primary reasons why JTPA underserves Hispanics. JTPA reimbursement to contractors is contingent on the ability of the service provider to place participants in unsubsidized employment. This requirement, plus low per-client funding allocations, are strong deterrents for service providers to work with limited-English proficient and illiterate adults and provide basic educational skills and remedial instruction. Many nonprofit organizations have found it almost impossible to provide English language services as part of their job-training programs or serve limited-English proficient individuals, because of JTPA's emphasis on short-term training and the minimal amount of funds available for supplementary services. A key purpose of JTPA, like its predecessor CETA, is supposed to be providing services to dropouts. Under CETA, 42% of those served were dropouts, but under JTPA, dropouts make up only 33% of enrollees.42 Because Hispanics experience the highest dropout rates among all major groups, the reduction of JTPA services to dropouts has also limited services to Hispanics. While the funding level for CETA reached a high of $10.2 billion in FY 1979, JTPA has been funded at much lower levels since its inception. JTPA funding has fallen from $4.8 billion in FY 1980 to $3.46 billion in FY 1986, reaching only 3-5% of all persons eligible for services.43 JTPA thus provides minimal services to severely disadvantaged people such as the functionally illiterate and the limited-English proficient.

The few programs that are designed to serve limited-English proficient people have had their funding cut severely and have very limited resources. Funding for Title VII -- which authorizes the Family English Literacy Program -- has declined over the last five years, from $167 million in FY 1980 to $134 million in 1986.44 The Family English Literacy Program is a very small program for limited-English proficient adults within an Act that is designed primarily to meet the needs of limited-English proficient children. The Department initially attempted to deny funds to this program, but as a result of Congressional pressure, the Department announced that it would fund two programs. In FY 1985 the Department received over 50 applications for this program and funded a total of four programs nationwide. Because of the demand for Family English Literacy programs, the Department of Education has increased funding for this program but it will still reach only a very small number of limited-English proficient adults.

The Bilingual Vocational Training program is similarly too small. This program has always been funded at minimal levels; the program was cut from $4.8 million in FY 1980 to $3.6 million in FY 1986 and has often been proposed for elimination.45 In FY 1986 only 1,736 students will receive training, and less than half of these will be Hispanic.46

Among publicly-funded programs at the state and local levels, Hispanics are also underserved. For example, in California -- the state with the largest Hispanic population and the largest state literacy campaign -- Hispanics who are limited-English proficient are unable to participate in literacy programs, which require that learners have oral English proficiency before they can be tutored. The Los Angeles library literacy program, which has a similar requirement for its students, reported that in 1985, 16% of the people who applied to the program were referred to English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes. The Los Angeles library program serves an average of just 179 students a year, 35% of whom are Hispanic. The Los Angeles program has also reported that its least successful literacy center is located in largely Hispanic East Los Angeles, where there are currently only nine tutors available and over 200 people awaiting services.47

Private literacy programs also are generally not designed to meet the needs of Hispanics. For example, the programs run by corporations typically serve their present employees -- those for whom whose illiteracy did not pose a barrier to initial employment. These literacy programs tend not to be basic literacy classes, but rather self-improvement vehicles for employees. They do not serve individuals whose lack of English literacy prevents them from obtaining employment. Among literacy programs administered by Literacy Volunteers of America and Laubach Literacy, Inc., the need to be English-speaking before entering a literacy program is also a common obstacle to Hispanic participation. These volunteer groups have recently employed staff to develop their ability to reach non-English speaking persons. Literacy programs which depend on volunteers generally serve a very small number of people in Hispanic and other low-income communities because of a lack of volunteers in areas where needs are greatest.

Non-English-speaking Hispanics are often turned away from literacy programs or face long waiting lists for ESL classes that are publicly-funded or at local community colleges that often charge for services. In Los Angeles alone, school officials estimate that 40,000 adults will be turned away from ESL classes during the 1986-87 school year48; educators in New York report a similar situation in that city.49 A needs assessment of adult English literacy classes in regions with large concentrations of Hispanics, conducted in 1986 by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), found that ESL classes at community colleges generally

fill up quickly and have long waiting lines. The LULAC survey also found that some community colleges have residency requirements that prohibit individuals who have not resided in the area for a set period of time from enrolling.50 Fees and tuition are additional barriers to ESL classes for low-income people. Because of their limited skills, low-income people generally cannot afford to pay for literacy classes, and parents with small children are unable to afford child care.

In general, present literacy services are inadequate to meet the literacy needs for Hispanics both because the level of services is too low and because literacy programs are not designed for individuals who are both illiterate in English and limited-English proficient. While there are not enough existing literacy programs to meet the general need for services, programs that serve Hispanics are especially rare, small, and have few resources.

C. Effective Program Models

Effective literacy programs for Hispanic adults are typically community-based. A number of community-based organizations have proven track records in providing literacy services to Hispanics. The effectiveness of community-based literacy programs and the need to develop more of them has been recognized by literacy experts and members of the business community. In testimony before Congress, Peter Waite, the national director of Laubach Literacy, Inc., noted that such programs have been the most successful in reaching those individuals which the federal programs have overlooked.51 The Business Council for Effective Literacy dedicated an issue of its newsletter to the role of community-based organizations in efforts to eliminate illiteracy among low-income and minority communities, and encouraged corporations to help increase community-based efforts.52

The Barrio Education Project (BEP) in San Antonio, Texas, is an example of a successful project which served Hispanics until its demise in the early 1980s. Literacy classes were conducted not in a school classroom, but at a community center which was a non-threatening environment for participants. According to Carolina Rodriguez, former director of the BEP, this program was unique because the literacy curriculum was developed according to the learners' self-identified needs. Reading was taught through discussion of such topics as the family, the community, and living in the United States. Rodriguez explains that this model follows the Frierian approach to learning, building on previous experiences of the learner, with the new learning experiences placed in the learner's social and political context. According to Rodriguez, literacy training at the BEP was an empowering process.53 While the typical literacy program experiences attrition rates of 30-40%, the BEP reported a near 100% attendance rate among its students.54

The four Family English Literacy Programs (FELP) funded in FY 1986 are either operated by community-based organizations, with the help of such groups, or are community-based models. Two projects report that they work with adults who, aside from being limited-English proficient, are often illiterate in their native language as well. In these programs, literacy is first taught in the native language and then in English. Three of the four projects report that bilingual personnel are a key factor in their ability to reach limited-English proficient adults. The directors of all four FELP programs reported that their literacy instruction revolves around themes of interest and concern to the learners. Two programs use such topics as the family and what to do in an emergency to teach reading and writing, and one project includes such "hands-on" activities as cooking and personal grooming to instruct the participants on matters of health. All the programs also

include instruction on how parents can help their children succeed in school, and encourage children and adults to help each other learn.35

Effective literacy programs for Hispanics have several common identifiable traits. While many of these traits are not unique to effective programs for Hispanics, some of them do take into account the special circumstances of Hispanics. These traits include:

- **Non-threatening and accessible locations.** Effective literacy programs are typically located in the communities where those in need of services live. Programs are usually held in non-traditional settings that do not replicate threatening environments for the learner; this includes the classroom, where many Hispanics who have dropped out of school have experienced prior failure.

- **Appropriately trained personnel.** Effective programs employ individuals trained in adult learning, and programs for the limited-English proficient employ bilingual personnel trained in second language acquisition. These may also be volunteers.

- **Appropriate curriculum.** Effective literacy programs do not assume or require English fluency. These programs also teach reading and writing using materials and methods which are at an adult level, using themes and topics that are relevant to the learner.

- **Accessible services.** Effective literacy programs are generally inexpensive or free, so that low-income people can participate, and provide child care so that parents can attend classes or tutoring sessions.

- **Effective outreach.** Recruitment of learners is not limited to written flyers, but also involves information spread by word-of-mouth at public gatherings (i.e. religious services and community events) and by the media. Information is also disseminated using non-English languages in order to reach limited-English proficient individuals.

While literacy programs for Hispanics are rare and serve very few Hispanics, enough is known about successful programs to understand why they are effective. Programs such as the Barrio Education Project and the Family English Literacy Programs represent only a minute fraction of the efforts to combat illiteracy in the United States, but a very significant portion of the efforts to combat illiteracy among Hispanics because of their focus and success.

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### A. Conclusions

As prior sections of this report have indicated, illiteracy in the United States is a serious problem, and among the Hispanic population it is of critical proportions. By whatever measure of illiteracy employed, Hispanics have substantially higher rates of illiteracy than any other major population group. In addition, the following conclusions about Hispanic illiteracy are cause for serious concern:

- Illiteracy in English is not a problem unique to immigrants. Many native-born Hispanics are illiterate in English due to ineffective education or because they dropped out of school without having obtained basic literacy skills.

- Many Hispanics who are illiterate in English also face difficulties of limited-English proficiency; they cannot speak English fluently. This added barrier denies them access to most existing literacy programs.
- The public schools too often are not effectively developing literacy skills among Hispanics, whether they are limited-English proficient children or native-English speakers.

- Current non-school-based literacy programs are inadequate to meet the need for services among the general population and typically underserve Hispanics. Effective and affordable literacy programs for Hispanics are rare and serve a small proportion of the Hispanics in need of such services.

- Illiteracy forecloses Hispanic parents from becoming full partners in the education of their children, thus contributing to a new generation of Hispanics who lack full literacy.

- Illiteracy limits Hispanic participation in the labor force. It keeps many Hispanics unemployed or underemployed.

- Illiteracy limits Hispanic participation in national life. It makes voting difficult and prevents resident aliens from seeking to become naturalized citizens.

- Community-based literacy programs are among the most effective methods of reaching Hispanics, but these model programs suffer from minimal funding.

- The illiteracy problem among Hispanics requires immediate attention. As Hispanics become a greater proportion of the population and the work force, increasing Hispanic literacy will be essential for ensuring a trained labor force to meet the needs of the private and public sectors in the twenty-first century.

## B. Recommendations

The problem of illiteracy is currently receiving considerable media coverage. The "PLUS" program planned by the ABC and PBS networks should help assure that illiteracy will continue to capture the attention of policy makers, educators and citizens alike. As the discussion intensifies, the problem of illiteracy among Hispanics, and appropriate measures to address it, must be included. The following recommendations should be considered by policy makers:

1. **Illiteracy must be prevented among Hispanic children and youth by focusing attention on improving the educational system.**

Limited-English proficient children require effective bilingual education programs so that they can fully develop literacy skills without falling behind their English-speaking peers. Successful bilingual education programs should be supported and expanded, and federal attention should be directed at ensuring access to programs for all limited-English proficient children and at increasing program effectiveness and accountability. The federal Bilingual Education Act has been perenially underfunded, suffering budget reductions since 1980, and the current "bilingual initiative" by the Department of Education threatens to undermine the success of bilingual education.* The 1984 Bilingual Education Amendments, properly implemented, can help to meet these needs.

The educational system also fails to appropriately serve native English-speaking Hispanic students. Unless the particular needs of Hispanics are taken into account, the educational reform movement will be meaningless for Hispanics. Hispanic children should be reached in the primary grades with early intervention efforts. Programs designed to serve educationally disadvantaged children -- including Chapter One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Chapter One Migrant Education Program -- should be expanded to reach all eligible children. Dropout prevention and school retention programs should begin at the elementary and junior high school level, before students drop out, and continue throughout high school.

2. **School success requires greater involvement by the community, especially parents, and schools need to implement programs to increase the participation of Hispanic parents in their children's education.**

Research has shown that parents play a critical role in the education of their children. Programs which encourage parent participation in the school and the home -- such as the Family English Literacy Program -- provide parents with the training to help their children become readers and succeed in school. These programs not only promote the educational success of Hispanic children, but also address the problem of illiteracy among Hispanic adults. Schools must reach out to Hispanic parents, and this often involves bilingual personnel.

3. **Current publicly-funded employment and literacy programs require changes so that they can reach Hispanics.**

Programs such as the Adult Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, and the Library Services and Construction Act underserve those who are most undereducated and thus most in need. These programs also usually do not provide English literacy services to limited-English proficient adults. Such programs must be tightly

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*For a detailed discussion on the Department of Education's "Bilingual Initiative," see "Secretary Bennett's Bilingual Education Initiative: Historical Perspectives and Implications," National Council of La Raza, October 31, 1985.

targeted to reach the Hispanic community and refined where needed so that they can effectively serve Hispanics.

Inadequate funding limits the ability of the programs to reach a significant proportion of the eligible participants. More resources should be allocated to these programs to expand the number of individuals they reach.

4. **State and local literacy programs need refinement and increased targeting so that they can reach and serve Hispanics.**

Programs administered by state and local agencies and private volunteer groups should direct services to Hispanics. Literacy programs should include English-as-a-second-language components. When programs operate in Spanish-speaking communities, literacy programs must employ bilingual programs and bilingual personnel to improve outreach and recruitment and work with limited-English proficient people who are also illiterate in their native language.

5. **Literacy programs should be structured to meet the needs of low-income individuals and working parents.**

Consideration should be given to the constraints faced by working parents and single-parent households. Literacy programs should make such services as child care and transportation available, and schedule classes and tutoring sessions to assure that all adults have access to these services. Literacy programs should be low-cost or free where possible, since illiteracy rates are greatest among low-income people.

6. **Successful Hispanic literacy program models exist; they need to be identified, documented, and replicated.**

Programs such as the Barrio Education Project are effective but are rare and often suffer from inadequate funding. These community-based models should be supported with increased funds and expanded into other communities.

Hispanic community-based organizations are natural allies in the fight against illiteracy. These organizations are located in the community, are typically service providers, are actively interested in improving the quality of education available to Hispanic children, and are staffed by bilingual individuals. Many of these organizations already operate effective education, counseling and training programs and have successful program models and strategies to share with parents and the schools. Their ability to operate literacy programs should be developed and supported.

7. **Future federal literacy initiatives must address the needs of Hispanics.**

A wide variety of bills have been introduced to address the illiteracy problem in the United States, but only one targets limited-English proficient adults and out-of-school youth. Whatever

action Congress takes to address the problem of illiteracy must also specifically address the problem of illiteracy among Hispanics.

The English Proficiency Act is the only proposed federal initiative that would address the needs of limited-English proficient adults and out-of-school youth. This Act would establish a $10 million discretionary grant program for literacy programs for such individuals; it would reserve half its funds for literacy programs operated by community-based organizations and establish a clearinghouse for the collection and dissemination of effective literacy curricula for the limited-English proficient. This initiative offers particular promise for increasing literacy among Hispanic adults and young dropouts.

Improving the literacy of Hispanics is important not just for Hispanics, but for the future of the nation. High literacy rates for a growing portion of the population are important for the future enconomic, social and political strength of the United States. Literacy for Hispanics will also help ensure that all Americans have the access to such basic opportunities as obtaining meaningful employment, participating in the political process of the country, and reading a story to their children.

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## ENDNOTES


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